



Southeast Fishery Bulletin

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INITIAL REFERENDUM FOR THE GULF OF MEXICO RED SNAPPER INDIVIDUAL FISHING QUOTA PROGRAM (IFQ) APPROVED

The National Marine Fisheries Service (NOAA Fisheries) announces that the initial referendum for the Gulf of Mexico Red Snapper Individual Fishing Quota (IFQ) Program has passed by a majority vote. On February 12, 2004, NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office (SERO) mailed each eligible voter a ballot specifying the number of votes (weighting) that each voter was assigned. In this first referendum, fishermen qualified to vote were asked to decide whether a plan amendment establishing the IFQ Program should be prepared by the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council (Council).

NOAA Fisheries mailed a total of 157 ballots and associated explanatory information, via certified mail return receipt requested. All eligible voters received their ballots as evidenced by the return receipts received at SERO. One hundred and forty-five ballots (92%) were returned to SERO by the deadline date of February 27, 2004. One hundred and four ballots totaling 8,194,024 "yes" votes (81%) were received supporting the development of the IFQ program. Forty-one ballots totaling 1,962,433 "no" votes (19%) were received that did not support development of the IFQ program.

NOAA Fisheries will present the results of the first referendum to the Council at it March 8-12, 2004,

meeting in Mobile, Alabama. At that time, the Council may elect to proceed with development of an IFQ plan amendment. If the Council chooses to proceed, the proposed IFQ program would be developed through normal Council and rulemaking processes that would involve extensive opportunities for industry and public review and input at various Council meetings, public hearings, and during public comment periods on the plan amendment and regulations.

The plan amendment and regulations would only be submitted to the Secretary of Commerce (Secretary) for review and approval or disapproval if in a second referendum approval of the submission was passed by a majority of the votes cast by the eligible voters as described in the final rule previously published in the *Federal Register* (69 FR 6921). NOAA Fisheries will announce the required second referendum by publishing a notice in the *Federal Register* that would provide all pertinent information regarding the referendum. It should be noted, however, that even if both referendums pass, the Secretary is not mandated to enact an IFQ program.

NOAA Fisheries is an agency of the Commerce Department's National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.